Protecting water a priority

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Water is pervasive in Whitefish. We rely on Whitefish Lake for recreation and live on its shores. We float the Whitefish River. Our drinking water comes from the lake and out of Haskill Basin, which has been protected as part of conservation efforts.

And unlike many communities across the United States, Whitefish and the Flathead Valley are for now in the advantageous position of preventing against aquatic invasive species and threats to water quality, rather than having to deal with their consequences.

Threats to water quali-

ty — which encompasses aquatic invasive species threats, pollution from septic leachate, wastewater treatment and more — ranked third in a recent Pilot survey on the top issues facing Whitefish.

Overall, WLI executive director Mike Koopal says the community needs to

See Water, A2

Water

from A1

look long and hard about how the lake is handled.

"I think ultimately we need to look at our own lake culture, the WLI institute is here to provide science education and to work on natural resource initiatives, but really we need to rethink our lake culture — how do we interface with our lake and water bodies in a healthy way and take the steps to ensure that we pass on clean water quality to the next generations?"

Aquatic Invasive Species prevention

The city of Whitefish, along with the Whitefish Lake Institute and partnering with Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks at Whitefish Lake State Park, is in its third year of running watercraft inspection stations at two entry points on Whitefish Lake.

WLI developed the aquatic invasive species plan that in different forms has been in place on the lake for several years aimed at preventing the spread of zebra mussels to the lake and surrounding waterbodies. It recommended the city adopt a more extensive plan after waterbodies east of the Continental Divide previously tested positive or had suspect results for zebra mussels. The city first began supporting AIS management in 2013.

Last year the lake saw 2,501 watercraft inspections and 1,834 exit seals removed, for a total of 4,335 watercraft visits.

Statewide, Montana Fish, Wildlife and Parks and its partners conducted 109,788 watercraft inspections. Sixteen mussel-fouled vessels were found and more than 170 vessels were found to be transporting aquatic weeds.

Here in Whitefish, Koopal says the inspection and decontamination has been working well.

"The only way to quantify it is to say that we don't have AIS," he said.

Koopal pointed to a recent economic study from the Flathead Lake Biological Station that estimates the impacts an AIS outbreak in Montana could have.

"It put the price tag at $234 million annually as a cost to Montana to deal with AIS, should they become established here," Koopal said. "That's basically direct costs and doesn't include the indirect costs. So the money that we use in prevention I think is justified to keep these critters out."

Koopal also noted the success of an ongoing project to eradicate Eurasian watermilfoil from Beaver Lake.

That program, which started in 2012, has been a relatively rare success story in combating AIS.

"That first year we dredged 23.5 pounds of Eurasian watermilfoil. It went down to two plants in 2017 and in 2018 no plants were observed. This is a very atypical success story that was only successful because we aggressively managed it and it was detected early," he said.

Septic Leachate contamination

One of Whitefish's biggest water-related issues is the contamination of Whitefish Lake due to failing septic systems on properties located on the lake's shores.

Septic leachate is the liquid waste that remains after the wastewater drains through septic solids. It contains elevated concentrations of bacteria from human waste, detergents and other household materials that is transported by groundwater through sediments into the lake.

A 2012 WLI study identified three confirmed areas of contamination in City Beach Bay, Viking Creek and Lazy Bay. It also identified two areas with a high potential for contamination and four areas with medium potential. The ad-hoc Whitefish Community Wastewater Management Committee was subsequently formed by City Council and produced a management plan that recommended the city conduct preliminary engineering reports for five neighborhoods around the lake after being identified as having medium to high risk of septic leachate contamination.

The first two — for the Lion Mountain and East Lakeshore neighborhoods — were subsequently completed and both confirmed contamination entering the lake as a result of failing septics and recommendations that homeowners connect to city sewer.

Koopal says there's a number of issues within the topic of septic contamination, one of them just being that homeowners can't always tell when there's a problem.

"Most people don't even know if they have a septic or not and they don't know if their septic is failing," he said. "If you look at Lion Mountain, people flush their toilet and they sit on a fractured bedrock bedding plane with a thin soil mantle, so the septic leachate finds its way pretty easily down into the groundwater and to the lake. They're never presented with septic effluent backing into their house because of a failed system, the failure is actually out in the drain field." Koopal says WLI is taking a two-pronged approach to combat septic pollution.

The focus on one end is the local side, where WLI will continue to provide education and planning about septic leachate. The other end is at the state level, where Koopal says he's working with State Rep. Mark Noland, R-Bigfork, on a study bill that would examine the hurdles cities can face when attempting to update septic systems and address pollution.

"It's not a study to fill up bottles with water [for testing], we've already done that and we already know there's a problem," Koopal says. "But these are more social issues — what are the funding mechanisms, and how can we better package those grants and funding incentives for local governments to have as a tool to communicate locally?"

Respondents to the survey shared their thoughts on what the city should prioritize with regards to water, like "securing safe drinking water supply for the coming decades."

Dealing with septic leachate pollution, rose to the top of respondents' concerns.

"Insist that offenders of septic leachate into our lake is totally unacceptable," one comment said. "Owners need to fix the problem now or City Hall should condemn their property or attach a lien so it stops the leakage. What gives Whitefish Lake homeowners the right to poop in our drinking [and] recreational waters?"